

# Hot Topics in U.S. Education

By DEMIAN SMITH



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**E**ducation is one of the most significant political issues in the minds of many Americans. Few issues are as personal and controversial to citizens as deciding how their children should be taught. During elections, from local to federal, education is consistently one of the most hotly debated and influential topics in determining for whom an American decides to vote.

The United States provides high-quality public education to all citizens as a right, rather than a privilege. Most children attend public (government funded) schools from kindergarten through high

school, also known as K-12 education. In short, the U.S. education system presupposes that education gives anyone the ability to succeed.

The United States does not have a nationalized education system or a national curricula, so not only parents, but all voters have a say over how children are educated. Americans can vote for or against local taxes to fund schools, teachers and equipment. They also elect local school boards and state, city and county officials who decide how to spend the money and set policies on curricula and even dress and behavior. Also, most schools have organi-

zations made up of parents, teachers and sometimes students that work together to improve their school.

**What education-related issues are debated?**

**Curricula:**

- President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act has been the subject of much attention, particularly during the current election campaign. The Act seeks to make local school districts accountable for their students' performance as well as allowing more flexibility for parents to choose which school district their child attends.
- The United States continues to be a nation of immigrants. The foreign-born now comprise 12 percent of the country's population and many do not speak English (mostly Spanish but also Mandarin, Tagalog, French, Vietnamese and many other languages). Some advocacy groups are pushing for bilingual education, but a majority of school districts use the English as a Second Language program to teach non English-speaking students.
- Sex education is another issue of



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*Above: Fourth graders at the non-public Allen Christian School in New York celebrate after winning a quiz.*

*Left: Huy Nguyen, 5, learning to read English at a California school. State voters passed a proposition in 1998 to eliminate bilingual education because of its extra costs. But parents in some areas cast a vote of their own, exercising their right to request waivers and put their children back into bilingual classrooms.*

## School Grades in the U.S.

The first year of compulsory schooling begins for children at the age of five or six. They are then placed in year groups known as grades, beginning with first grade and culminating in 12th grade. When asked what grade they are in, typical American children are more likely to say "first grade" rather than "Grade One." Typical ages and grade groupings in public and private schools may be found through the U.S. Department of Education. Variations exist across the country.

Level/Grade	Typical age
<b>Preschool</b>	
Various optional, yet recommended programs such as Head Start	Under 6
Pre-Kindergarten	4-5
Kindergarten	5-6
<b>Elementary school</b>	
1st Grade	6-7
2nd Grade	7-8
3rd Grade	8-9
4th Grade	9-10
<b>Middle school</b>	
5th Grade	10-11
6th Grade	11-12
7th Grade	12-13
8th Grade	13-14
<b>High school</b>	
9th Grade (Freshman)	14-15
10th Grade (Sophomore)	15-16
11th Grade (Junior)	16-17
12th Grade (Senior)	17-18
<b>Post-secondary education</b>	
College or University	Ages vary. Usually four years, referred to as Freshman, Sophomore, Junior and Senior years.
Vocational schools	Ages vary
Post-Graduate	Ages vary
Night school for working adults	Ages vary

considerable debate. In most districts, it is covered in some fashion in the school curricula, but there is a constant debate between those who say students need it for health reasons, and those who contend it should be taught at home.

- Another controversial topic is teaching how mankind began. While evolution is the standard theory taught in science classes, some religious groups argue that students should also be exposed to creationism, the view that God created the Earth and its occupants. This issue rose to national attention in 1999 when the School Board of the State of Kansas decided to eliminate evolution questions from state tests, and therefore the subject was not covered by many teachers.
- Another debate concerns religion in the classroom and what is allowed in a country where church and state are separate. Courts have been asked to rule on whether the Constitution allows the posting of the Ten Commandments, formal prayers in school and for religious or faith-based student groups to meet on school property.

### Funding:

In addition to the No Child Left Behind Act's ability to affect federal funding to state and local school districts, there are debates on the question of who has to pay for public schools. Some taxpayers whose children attend private school claim it is unfair for them to fund an educational system they are not using. They argue that if their child attends a private school, they should be able to take the funds which the public school no longer needs and apply that money towards private school tuition in the form of vouchers. However, tax proponents point out that every person pays property taxes for public education, not just parents of school-age children. Indeed, without it, public schools would not have enough money to remain open and the country would not be able to provide free

education to all. They argue that a public school system has many benefits such as producing a more educated and informed electorate, a more skilled workforce, and a better standard of life for all when most citizens are trained to reason and understand important issues.

### How did the U.S. education system develop?

U.S. public schools have traditionally focused on assimilation into American culture—an important and necessary aspect for a nation comprised of immigrants from around the world.

The country has come a long way since the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1870, only two percent of American schoolchildren graduated from high school. By 1900, 31 states had passed laws requiring children to attend school until age 14.

Teaching methods have also changed. In the past, lessons consisted of students reading aloud from their texts and emphasis was placed on rote memorization. Corporal punishment, such as hitting students for incorrect answers, was common once but is now illegal and not tolerated.

Higher education in the United States began in the 1600s. Many of the early colleges and universities were founded to train church clergy and many still operate today, offering liberal arts education to all. Between 1880 and 1885, more than 150 new colleges and universities were opened in America. One interesting federal government program to promote higher education was the land-grant initiative in the late 1800s. In this program, the federal government offered to give 12,140 hectares to each state, on the condition that they used the land (or proceeds from its sale) to

*Jessica Berry (left), president of the Parent-Teacher Association of Booker T. Washington Academy in Lexington, Kentucky, visits the school to spend time with her five-year-old daughter, Alyssa Jones.*





#### For more information:

No Child Left Behind

<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb>

Public education in the United States

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761571494/public\\_education\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761571494/public_education_in_the_united_states.html)

Display of religious symbols

<http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/issinfo/clssrelysym.htm>

Ten Commandments Defense Act of 2003

<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:H.R.2045>

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establish universities. The University of California, Virginia Tech and Texas A&M are examples of higher education systems which were formed as part of this program.

#### Who makes decisions about how students are educated?

While there is a federal Department of Education, it plays a relatively minor role in education policy in comparison to school boards and state governments. In fact, the Department of Education is the smallest Cabinet-level department, with only about 4,200 personnel. Local school boards are a common entry point for those seeking a career in public office due to their visibility and control over such an important issue.

The effects of the decentralized approach to education were apparent from the country's founding. Different regions had different approaches, based on the needs and desires of the citizens. For example, regions such as Boston, New York and the rest of New England had more need for their children to have formal education to meet the local demands of an industrialized workforce, and therefore wrote this into their state constitutions. Southern and western states, which were more rural and agricultural, needed this less, and many did

not address formal education in their constitutions until later.

Today, however, all regions place high importance on excellent education for all students.

#### What is the most typical education route for American children?

Many children begin their formal education at preschool, but it is neither mandatory nor widely funded. One large federal program known as Head Start funds and offers preschool to economically disadvantaged students in an effort to assist with educational development at early ages.

Public school is usually compulsory from first through eighth grade (or age 14). These schools are tax supported and therefore students pay nothing to attend. Books are also free. If parents prefer and can meet some basic requirements, they can educate their child at home. This is referred to as "home schooling." Most students aim to receive their high school diploma (graduating from high school, or finishing 12th grade).

After school, students can choose to enter the work force, or pursue further education such as college or vocational courses. Colleges are either private or state funded. Only a few are federally funded and the most well known of these are the service

*President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush with fourth and fifth graders from New York Public School 76 in September 2007, promoting the No Child Left Behind program.*

academies, which educate officers for the branches of the military. Community colleges are local education systems which provide a college degree at a much lower cost than other schools and often have flexible classes which allow students to attend at night—a key element for those who wish to work a full-time job or raise a family.

Each state has a public university system, which is always nonprofit. College education in the United States is expensive—a typical year's tuition at a public university costs up to \$13,000. Attending a private university or one outside the student's home state can cost double or triple that amount, and graduate education is usually even more expensive. Many schools offer financial aid or scholarships to attract students to their campuses, and many students work part-time to help with college costs.



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## U.S. Presidential Candidates' Views on Education

### Hillary Clinton

Clinton has criticized President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind program for alleged lack of funding. She says she will increase teacher recruitment and decrease the rate at which minorities drop out of high school. To make higher education more affordable, Clinton proposes providing a \$3,500 tax credit for college students and increasing scholarships for those who commit to volunteering in the AmeriCorps program for a year after graduation.

### John McCain

McCain says that "schools can and should compete" for the best teachers, and reward teachers whose students do well. He believes that students should have the option of switching public schools in order to receive the best education and that "all federal financial support must be predicated on providing parents the ability to move their children, and the dollars associated with them, from failing schools."

### Barack Obama

Obama says he would improve funding for the No Child Left Behind program. He also says he would "make math and science education a national priority" and increase recruitment of teachers in these subjects. In order to do that, Obama proposes four-year scholarships for those in college who promise to teach for at least four years after graduation. He pledges to implement a \$4,000 tax credit for college students.